

Free History

How to ride the waves of time

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I am going to begin by saying something controversial. I think that many of the problems facing historians and historical novelists can be summed up in one word: *school*. In saying this I do not mean to criticise the legion of hard-working history teachers who do so much to enhance their pupils' understanding. Many positive things are due to their passion and commitment. Nevertheless, it remains the case that traditional academic history – from school to university – is the root of much ignorance and misunderstanding.

The problem is not the *way* we teach the subject. It is not the tyranny of the classroom – although obviously that can be a problem. It is the *type* of history we teach. Or to be specific, it is that we only teach one type of history, traditional history, which has its limitations.

Let me begin with the myth of objectivity. You can see why this is built into the syllabus. Young people are taught to assess a large body of evidence dispassionately so they come to some meaningful conclusions. That skill makes them useful to future employers. That's all well and good. But it leads to a static, one-dimensional impression of the past. It implies that a remote, distant view of a subject is better than an up-close-and-personal one. I am far from certain that that is true. It certainly isn't *always* true.

I also have a problem with the idea that objectivity in history is possible. As postmodernists demonstrated in the 1960s and 1970s, we all have a point of view simply by virtue of existing. This infuriated traditionalists at the time. Professor Sir Geoffrey Elton responded indignantly in his book *The Practice of History*, saying, "That men can never eliminate themselves from the search for truth is nonsense, and pernicious nonsense at that, because it... favours the purely relativist concept of history."¹ But it is Elton's objection that is nonsense. I can no more 'eliminate myself' from being an English middle-class white man than I can 'eliminate myself' from *not* being an American working-class black woman. Does anyone doubt that a history of America by me would not be substantially different from one written by a working-class black American woman? We all have our perspectives, and we can shift them if we make an effort to do so, but we can never 'eliminate ourselves' from the need to

have a perspective – no more than we can take off our own skin or speak without an accent.

A third problem arising from traditional history is the need to judge historical characters by the standards of their own time. Academic historians often criticise those who apply modern standards to past individuals. They deem it anachronistic. And of course they are right. However, if we judge men like Edward Colston of Bristol according to the standards of his own time, we have to applaud him as one of the greatest philanthropists who ever lived. By the time of his death in 1721, he had given more than £70,000 to charity at a time when most families earned less than £40 a year. This is why he was praised as a model citizen in a biography published in 1852, which ended with the words ‘few men are more truly admirable than Edward Colston’.² But today we cannot ignore the fact that Colston made a significant portion of his money from the slave trade. Yes, we must assess him by the standards of his own time in order to understand why he did what he did but we must also acknowledge that influential people like him leave legacies that develop and have consequences for others long after their deaths.

My principal objection to traditional academic history, however, is simply how facts are construed. As W. H. Walsh states in his influential *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*,

A statement is true, we are told, if it corresponds with fact; but what is fact? Here common language is ready with an answer. The facts in any sphere, we should normally say, are what they are independently of the enquirer into it; in some senses they exist whether or not anybody thinks about them.³

Although scientists had realised by the 1930s that facts are invented by thinking people and that Walsh was totally wrong to say ‘they exist whether or not anyone thinks about them’ he is far from the only writer on historical practice to think like this. Arthur Marwick tells us in *The Nature of History*, ‘Self-evidently the past contains almost an infinity of facts... There are the ‘simple’ ‘public’ facts ([the] date and place of the Battle of Hastings), [and] the complex ‘private facts’ (the psychological state of a particular individual at a particular point in time).⁴ E. H. Carr too declares in *What is History?* that historians select their facts and that these become ‘well-established facts’ after a number of other historians have repeated them.⁵ As recently as 1997, Professor Sir Richard Evans declared in his book *In Defence of History* that ‘events are facts’ – adding for clarity that buildings and anything similar that had existed was also a fact.⁶ Traditional academic history as represented by these dated but influential works all suggest that every aspect of past reality is a matter of fact and that it just takes a historian to find the evidence that points to it and declare it to be true.

I utterly reject all of this. If everything in the past is a fact then the name of the person who built Stonehenge is a fact. But we can never know it because no records exist from that time. And if one source were miraculously to appear that suggested a name,

we would never be able to confirm or verify it. It would remain forever doubtful. This is the very opposite of what we understand by the word ‘fact’. For something to be factual, we must be able to show how we know it to be true, not just believe it.

As you can see, our traditional approach to studying the past is problematic for a number of reasons. It supposes there is a single ‘god’s eye view’ of everything that ever happened, as if the historian is peering down on the past from a heavenly cloud and viewing events, people and situations through a historical monocle. It suggests that all histories are part of one single over-arching history. It suggests that the historian’s own background is inhumanly neutral, devoid of empathy or any sort of partiality. It suggests historians can pick and choose facts simply on the basis of their belief. It demands unexciting,, neutral language to be used and expects that passionate or emotional writing will be cut out. It prioritises analytical precision over both the imagination and humanity.

This gets us to the crux of the matter. What traditional historians think is ‘good history’ is the result of a widespread conviction that history has to be written in a certain formulaic way. The goal is academic excellence – not empathy, entertainment or excitement. It is not going too far to say that traditional academic history does for our ancestors what nineteenth-century lepidopterists did to butterflies: it suffocates them and pins them out in rows so they can be classified, studied and judged. But we all know that butterflies are best seen flying around. If we could ask butterflies for their own views on the matter, they would no doubt agree.

So how can history be done differently? Can we write history that actually ‘flies around’? Can we free history from the suffocating bell jar of the historian-as-lepidopterist? And can we do these things without sacrificing historical accuracy?

In order to answer these questions, first I am going to show you what we are really doing when we study the past and how we can be sure facts are true and not simply matters of belief. This allows us to see what we *have* to accept as past reality and what we don’t. What we *have* to accept amounts to a framework of historical facts that binds us all, whether we are scholarly historians or popular novelists. But a lot of things you may think are facts are nothing of the sort. We don’t have to accept them. After that, I am going to show you how we can employ a wide variety of literary forms when building on that framework of facts. As you will see, we are not looking at a straightforward fiction/non-fiction divide. Historical literature is more like a multi-faceted jewel. Some facets employ humour; some facets display conjecture; some deliberately reflect a single person’s point of view, others juxtapose multiple perspectives; some are written in the present tense; some employ set pieces; some consider what didn’t happen; some are deliberately skewed to favour a female or male perspective or that of a specific community; some are written in poetry; some are theatrical. Each one allows us to see the past in a different light. If by the end of this talk you understand that all historical writing is a creative act, and that no literary form

is superior to any other – so that good history can be written in any literary form, including fiction – then I will have achieved something positive.

First, we must tackle this question of what is a fact.

The most important thing to understand is that we cannot study the past *directly* because, by definition, it doesn't exist anymore. You can't study something that doesn't exist. So it is more accurate to say we study the *evidence* that remains from the past. But even this is not the case. Evidence never speaks for itself. Even a clearly written document needs to be read by someone who understands the language, culture and perspective of its creator. Even if a document or film seems to imply something it is still down to us to show that what it implies is true. Similarly, every old artefact and building needs to be interpreted to produce useful historical information. So when we say we are 'studying the past', what we are actually doing is considering a mass of information drawn from the evidence; we are not studying the past itself.

Imagine you are looking at a tree. You will probably say you 'see' the tree but what your eye actually sees is light bouncing off the tree, not the tree itself. We are conditioned to overlook the process of *how* we see things because everything we see is the result of light entering our eyes. But the fact remains that it is the *light* that reaches us, not the tree directly. The same thing applies to knowing the past. We are conditioned to overlook the process of *how* we know about the past because everything we know is the result of information coming to our attention. But it is the *information* that reaches us, not the past itself. Just as you would not be able to see a tree in darkness, so you would not be able to say anything about the past without information extracted from the evidence. Information is to knowing as light is to seeing.

This point about information is crucial because it allows us to establish *how* we know what we think we know about the past and, in particular, how we can establish facts. And I would say, in an information age, *how* we know something is just as important as the known thing itself. If you don't know how you know something you are in no better a position than someone who has simply accepted something he has read on social media. What you *think* you know is not knowledge but merely belief.

If we take the view that history is the study of information, we can define each piece of information we wish to use and establish whether it is to be found in multiple *independent* sources. If it is, we may regard it as confirmed. If that piece of information is defined in *absolute* terms and is not contradicted by any other information, we can say it is an absolute fact. For example, as we all know, Queen Victoria came to the throne on 20 June 1837. There's nothing relative, approximate or impressionistic about that piece of information whatsoever. There's no doubt about it either; it is amply evidenced. It is an absolute fact and therefore is the same for me and for you and for everyone else– and will be so forever. It reflects past reality.

History is littered with absolute facts of this nature. They might appear to be basic matters of chronicle and thus trivial but they are vitally important because they constitute the framework of the actual past to which we all must adhere if we wish to link our work with past reality – if we wish to tell the truth.

So much for absolute facts. What about matters that cannot be defined in absolute terms?

Traditionalists would say it is a fact that Queen Victoria loved Prince Albert. But what is love? That is not something we can define in absolute terms. My understanding of love is no doubt different from yours and none of us can know what Victoria herself meant by the word. Besides, there were no doubt days when Albert really annoyed Victoria and her ‘love’ was perhaps on hold for a little while. As a result, it cannot be regarded as a fact that Victoria loved Prince Albert because ‘love’ is a relative term, subject to variation, and not specific enough to be an object of historical knowledge.

The same thing goes for intention. I might think that Henry V restarted the conflict with France in 1415 in order to strengthen his claim on the *English* throne by winning battles in *France*, thereby demonstrating it was God’s will that he should be king of both France and England, but I cannot prove the matter. Explanations of causes and intentions are always theoretical; they cannot be proven because – as we all know – correlation is not causation. Explanations as to why something happened originate in our modern minds, based on our own life experiences, learning and intuition. They can never be facts. The framework of facts that you must take into consideration when writing about the past is limited to the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ of past events and situations – things that can be defined in absolute terms. Everything else is open to interpretation.

Now I am not suggesting that you can disregard all the evidence that Queen Victoria loved her husband. You would be unwise to write a novel in which they were plotting against each other over breakfast and weren’t close – they had nine children, after all. What I am saying is that we must be careful in distinguishing what is actually factual and what is open to interpretation. Victoria’s feelings for Albert at any given time cannot be regarded as a fact – that much is obvious – but they are consistently positive: loving, passionate, even worshipful. The evidence contains a lot of correlating information which forms a pattern which, although undefinable and thus unprovable, is nonetheless widely understandable. No good historian would ignore a pattern of correlating information. Nor should any novelist.

As for my explanation of why Henry V restarted the war. It can’t be proved but Henry obviously restarted the war for *some* reason or reasons. You might think the explanation I have suggested is the most likely or you may doubt it. But although the matter cannot be proven, in order to doubt my explanation, you have to come up with a better one that also correlates with the totality of known absolute facts.

All this is obvious when you think about it but it totally conflicts with the traditional approach. Traditionalists believe they are able to study the past directly, as if it were still extant. As mentioned above, they believe that events themselves are facts, and that someone's emotional state at any given time is a fact, and that motives are facts – that basically all of past reality is an almost infinite series of facts. This is not just misguided; it severely hampers them when it comes to writing about the past.

What did the air smell like on the morning of the Battle of Agincourt, after all that rain? You and I might make an educated guess – and we can do so without contravening any of the framework of known facts – but the traditional historian cannot even make a suggestion because he knows the supposed 'fact' of what it smelled like is unknowable. Consequently, not only does an information-based approach allow us greater certainty – because we can establish whether there is an information basis for any facts we need to employ – but it also allows us greater latitude in literary form, for we are free to suggest generalities on the basis of likelihood and context.

This is the point at which the creativity begins. We have a vast number of facts at our disposal and we can use them in many ways. But as mentioned a moment ago, they are merely the 'who', 'what', 'where' and 'when' of the past. To understand their meaning, or to give them meaning, we must bring our own ingenuity and creativity to bear upon them. We must consider all the patterns of correlating information. We must be inventive and sympathetic. Matters such as love and hate that are open to interpretation can be interpreted. Motives can be suggested. Explanations can be advanced. Drama can be introduced. The one and only rule is that whatever we write, we must observe the framework of absolute facts. We cannot do a 'Braveheart' and suggest William Wallace fathered Edward III, who was born seven years after Wallace was publicly executed. Such a suggestion is not history; it is not even historical fiction; it is unhistorical nonsense.

Let me use the rest of this talk to illustrate what possibilities are open to us if we embrace free history – history, that is free from the constraints of traditional history and which acknowledges no limitations other than the framework of absolute facts and patterns of correlating information.

Perhaps the easiest place to start is with my own series of *Time Traveller's Guides* – to Medieval England, Elizabethan England, Restoration Britain and Regency Britain. These take readers by the hand, as it were, and guide them around the past as if they could actually go there. I literally treat the past as if it were 'a foreign country'. If you find yourself in the fourteenth century, what are you going to wear, where might you stay, what diseases might kill you – what doctors might kill you. The result is wholly unlike a traditional history book in that it is written in the present tense and addresses the reader directly – where will *you* stay, what will *you* eat, and so forth. I include a lot of humour because humour is a natural part of life. Despite this, writing in the present tense is also a way of writing seriously about the past. The form allows me to suggest

how you would feel if you watched your children die from plague, or if you were an unfree serf working on a manor, forbidden from marrying the person you love because he or she belonged to a different manor. What's more, the whole approach soon reveals where traditional history is lacking. We have hundreds of books on the Hundred Years War but very few on personal hygiene. I put it to you that if you found yourself in fourteenth-century England, where to go to the loo and what to use as toilet paper would soon become much more pressing issues than whether the French were likely to invade.

Another way of drawing readers into a 'reconstructed' historical world is to describe it in terms calculated to evoke an emotional response. As every novelist and actor is aware, one should 'show, not tell'. More historians could benefit from this same advice. If I tell you that Henry, earl of Derby – the future Henry IV – lost his wife Mary in June 1394, when he was twenty-seven, you are unlikely to know how deeply her death affected him. Perhaps they weren't close. However, if I remind you that they had been together since they he was fourteen and she was twelve, and that they had had six children together, and that they used to sing and play music together, and that they would send each other presents such as baskets of apples and pears or fresh fish when forced through political necessity to be apart, you might start to realise that her death was a tragic loss to him. We are not falling foul of the framework of historical facts in stressing this emotional response. It would be wrong to suggest that, just because we don't know what he felt, he felt nothing. Whatever Henry actually felt will never be known, so the best we can do is make suggestions based on what we know of their relationship and his character.

On a similar note, when trying to engage a larger audience, it is useful to employ sensory descriptions. Evoking a sense of smell works particularly well, as Patrick Suskind demonstrated in his novel *Perfume*. The combination of sights and sounds in set pieces also works well. For example, if you describe a medieval battle in terms of how many soldiers defeated an enemy of such and such size, the chances are that you are just adding to the list of facts that your reader has to remember. But if you describe the flared nostrils and the whinnying and rearing of the scared horses; the heralds' trumpet blasts; the shouts of determined footmen advancing hurriedly in their mud-spattered tunics with their pikes held out in front of them; and the knights who, having downed a flask of wine, are cursing and impatiently waiting for their squires to strap their last piece of armour in place, you will create a picture that will draw your readers in. They won't need to try to remember the scene because they will feel they have been part of it. They will have sensed the urgency. Again, although none of this is directly evidenced, it may be reasonably inferred from what we know about medieval battles.

An example of how we can write history that challenges the traditional 'god's-eye' approach is my current project, *The History of England through the Windows of an Ordinary House*. This book, which will be finished early next year, is a study of England from the earliest times to the present day from the point of view of the people who lived in my

house in Moretonhampstead. It isn't just a local history nor is it just a national one; it combines cultural and social history with political changes. It focuses on people that you have never heard of. The key difference is perspective. You could do this for any ancient house anywhere in the world and every result would be different and every result would be equally true. Each one of those separate histories would show our well-worn patchwork quilt of a national history to be in some way misleading or inadequate. For example, you might expect any author discussing the twelfth century to devote plenty of space to the nineteen-year-long civil war between Stephen and Matilda. I don't, not in this book. The civil war never came further west than Exeter. Thus it only occupies a single paragraph, to explain this. The death of Thomas Becket, on the other hand, who was murdered in 1170 by the lord of the manor of Moretonhampstead, William de Tracy, had enormous consequences. Local men whom he had endowed with lands had no choice but to follow him on his pilgrimage of repentance to the Holy Land, leaving their wives behind. De Tracy never returned – nor did the men he took with him.

Different perspectives allow different histories to be written on the same subject. Most people will be familiar with the 1950 Japanese film *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa. In this film the same two events – the murder of a samurai and his wife's sexual encounter with a bandit – are shown from multiple perspectives, leaving the viewer unsure what actually happened beyond those two facts. Who murdered the samurai, the wife or the bandit? Or was someone else present? Was the wife seduced or was she raped? Or did she herself seduce the bandit in order to increase her chances of escaping? I am sure we can all think of novels that have similarly employed multiple perspectives and subjective viewpoints to tell different sides of the same story. The same thing is also possible in history. Every so often I consider writing about the struggle between Richard II and Henry IV in two columns on every page, simultaneously telling the story from each man's point of view. Alternatively, you could employ a two-column approach to write a fictional account alongside a non-fiction one. It wouldn't be the easiest thing to read, admittedly, but it would be an interesting exercise.

Since the mid-19th century historians have been accused of arranging facts to support their preferred arguments and prejudices. As the historian James Froude put it in 1864, in a far-sighted lecture to the Royal Institution entitled 'The Science of History',

It often seems to me as if history is like a child's box of letters, with which we can spell any word we please. We have only to pick out such letters as we want, arrange them as we like, and say nothing about those which do not suit our purpose.⁷

Postmodernists said much the same thing about history in the late twentieth century and it is fair to say that the criticism is still pertinent in many quarters, especially when dealing with national heroes. As a result, when I came to write about Henry V, I chose

to present *everything* known about him over the course of the year 1415 – the year of the Agincourt campaign – and to arrange all that information day by day. Nothing was set aside: I included every detail I could find. There was no arrangement to suit my predilections: all the information was laid out according to the day on which it happened. It was a significant challenge to make the book readable but in the end, it was a triumph. You could see not only what Henry V did over the course of that year but also what he did *not* do. Of all the hundreds of grants he made, the only ones to women were to his family and nurses who had looked after him in childhood. Some grants to his closest friends also mentioned their wives. Otherwise, he had very little to do with women. Some indication of how this English hero regarded women can be gleaned from an addition he made to the official code of conduct for his troops in France. If a woman was found with the army, on the first occasion she was to be warned. The second time she was to have her left arm broken. Had I not undertaken a comprehensive survey of everything we know about Henry in that year, this detail would have appeared an oddity. It was the innovative literary form that revealed Henry's apparent misogyny and provided a context for this disturbingly cruel order.

The day-by-day approach of my book on Henry also had the virtue of highlighting unresolved matters. In particular, it drew us into the jeopardy the king faced – especially as his army grew weaker on the march through France. Reconstructions of jeopardy are also a virtue of 'What if' history, championed by Niall Ferguson and others in the late 1990s. What if Charles I had been a little more pragmatic and avoided starting the Civil Wars? What if Hitler had invaded Britain? What if J. F. Kennedy had not been assassinated? Half-witted critics tend to give such studies a negative response, saying there is no point trying to imagine what didn't happen because it didn't happen and that's that. But that is like saying Thomas More should not written *Utopia* as it was never going to come true. The value of 'What if?' history lies in what it reveals about people's hopes and fears for the future. It highlights the tension and anxiety of the unresolved moment.

Let me give you an example. We all know that Francis Drake defeated the Spanish Armada but on the day he set sail, English people had no reason to be confident. Many would have feared the consequences of the Spanish army landing. If the Spanish had gained a foothold in the south of England, they might have been joined by armies of Catholic sympathisers from the Southwest and the North. Had their combined forces captured Queen Elizabeth, she would have lost her throne and probably her head. Protestants might have once more been burnt at the stake as heretics. So, it is certainly a valid question, 'what if the Spanish had defeated Drake and landed 18,000 troops on the south coast of England?' It was what everyone at the time was wondering.

Experimenting with literary form brings us close to science fiction. This too is a useful way of exploring time and the meaning of history.

A few years ago I was inspired to write about how our small everyday actions can have the most massive consequences hundreds of years down the line – a bit like a butterfly-wingbeat causing a typhoon, as outlined in chaos theory. I chose to write my ideas down in a novel, *The Outcasts of Time*. In this, two medieval brothers from Moretonhampstead catch the plague. They attempt to bargain with the devil to avoid dying but they are told they have only six days left to live; they can either go home and die in their beds or they can come back and live each one of their last six days ninety-nine years after the previous one. Obviously, they choose the latter. So they come back for one day in December 1447, 1546, 1645, 1744, 1843 and 1942. And they see the changes in the locality they know well and the things that don't change. But they also see the effects that their decisions in the fourteenth century subsequently had on the world. Obviously it was impossible to write this as a non-fiction work because no one lives for six hundred years; but using fiction, I was able to write a historical story which had much greater power and meaning than a non-fiction version could have done. And as I am constantly telling people, it is better to write approximations of the past that have profound meaning than exact accounts of it that have none.

I could go on to describe many more different facets of free history. I could mention pseudo-autobiography, such as Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. I could mention biography-as-collage, such as Ann Wroe's *Being Shelley*, or history-as-collage – and I would include Simon Schama's *Citizens* as a good example. Some novels have long passages of explanatory non-fiction within their chapters, such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Some historians employ fiction to illustrate a place in time, for instance, Professor John Hatcher's *The Black Death: an Intimate History*. But I probably do not need to give any more examples; you can see the big picture. Historical writing must follow the framework of known facts and patterns of correlating likelihoods. Beyond that, anything is possible.

Is there a difference between fiction and non-fiction in this world of free history? Yes. Literary forms close to fiction still require the reader to suspend their disbelief whereas forms closer to non-fiction still seek to persuade the reader to believe what they say. Willingly suspending your own disbelief is not the same as being persuaded by someone else that what they are saying is true. A second difference is simply that a specialist non-fiction writer will probably be aware of more absolute facts than all but the most thorough novelist. By the same token, a novelist will always have a harder time persuading his editor to include all the source material and references to show that the facts he mentions are all true. But otherwise the differences are largely down to tradition and marketing. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction is becoming less significant with every new inventive work produced.

This is why it is such a sadness that we generally only introduce children to traditional history. They leave school thinking that it only concerns people they will never meet whose hopes and fears are all a thing of the past. The truth is that historical writing is primarily about the world in which we live and our collective humanity, as seen through

the prism of time. There is still a place for traditional objective analysis – as I said earlier, no literary form is better than any other – as long as historians start to use information science to determine the framework of facts rather than declaring things to be true on the basis of their opinions. But let there also be free history – history that is free to explore the past and the human condition in new ways, and to rejoice in its discoveries, insights and revelations with each new generation.

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¹ Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History* (1967, Fontana ed., 1987), pp. 76-7.

² Thomas Garrard, *Edward Colston, the Philanthropist, his Life and Times* (1852), pp. 489-90.

³ W. H. Walsh's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1951; 6th imp. 1961), p. 74.

⁴ Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (1970, 3rd ed., 1989), p. 197.

⁵ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (1960), p. 12.

⁶ Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997), p. 79.

⁷ J. A. Froude, lecture to the Royal Institution, quoted in John Kenyon, *The History Men* (2nd ed., 1993), p. 124.